

**The Revenge of Folk Politics- Reflections on Angela Nagle and Florian Cramer's Conversation:
"Subcultures and the Politics of Transgression"-**

2016 witnessed the revenge of "folk politics". Of all the assumptions that have been overturned by the success of the Alt-right insurgency one the most surprising is the reversal of the widespread belief on the left, that we have outgrown grass roots media activism. Increasingly these activists have come to be seen as victims of 'communicative capitalism's perfect lure in which subjects feel themselves to be active, even as their every action reinforces the status quo.' ¹ . A general assumption has taken root along the lines that if these interventions posed any genuine threat to the status quo they would be immediately suppressed. However the success of the Alt-right in using the full armory of tactical media in the meme wars of 2016 not only repudiated this assumption but also remind us that there is nothing intrinsically progressive about transgressive sub-cultures or the disruptive aesthetics of the avant-garde.

Of the many commentators who have written about the rise of the Alt-right Florian Cramer and Angela Nagle, both stand out as having important and original perspectives on its underlying dynamics and origins. In the 2018 edition of [Transmediale](#) these two thinkers came together for an eagerly anticipated discussion.² So here we take the opportunity to reflect on this conversation in the context of wider efforts to understand these developments and learn from the failure of the left to anticipate and counter attack more effectively.

Background

It is important that we see the rise of the Alt-right against the background of a profound political re-orientation based on two parallel strategies; firstly the US far right has effectively occupied established leftist countercultural territories, deploying the tactics of subversive humour and transgression whilst at the same time moving to replace the traditional conservative right. This is the point emphasised by Cramer in the discussion as he depicts a new kind of politics in which "the fire-walls separating traditional conservatism and the new generation of far-right extremism have been all but burnt down as part of a larger tendency to effectively replace mainstream conservatism."

To some degree both Cramer and Nagle could be seen as building on years of important work by on-line ethnographers such as Whitney Phillips, Jessica Beyer and notably Gabriela Coleman, whose best selling book, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistle Blower, Spy. The Many Faces of Anonymous* ³ has done a great deal to illuminate the world of 'Anonymous' in the context of the wider 4chan 'message board' landscape. Moreover Coleman's position as a well-known expert enabled her to act as a bridge to the mainstream media and has helped to reduce the sum total of general journalistic ignorance.

Whatever differences exist between Coleman, Cramer and Nagle all three, share a belief in the political importance of the on-line sub-cultures associated with the message boards and their distinctive "ludic mode of spectacular intervention"⁴ as an important element in understanding the appeal of the movement.

Coleman's book gave a detailed account of this ludic aesthetic, once dubbed 'Lulz' as essentially a trickster brand of anarchic and occasionally spiteful on-line mayhem that has been a key constituent of hacker culture long before the message boards. But Coleman's research only really began in earnest in 2008 when Anonymous campaign against Scientology, signaled that something of greater political importance was emerging.

Inevitably like all research, Coleman's book is a victim of the passage of time as it charts a period before the center of political gravity on 4chan shifted decisively to the right. However Nagle and Cramer have argued that malignant far right sentiments were clearly visible and active within 4chan's culture from early on. And we can see evidence of this in Coleman's own research, particularly in her account of exchanges with the influential Troll Andrew Auernheimer, aka Weev, some of whose utterances make his later emergence as a fully-fledged neo-Nazi completely unsurprising. The question we are left with is this; was Coleman's reluctance to call out Auernheimer's obnoxious anti-Semitic utterances more fully, a necessary tactic in researching the subject, (he would undoubtedly have shut down communications had he been 'called out')? Or was Coleman exhibiting aspects of the academic left's tendency to be too tolerant to those exhibiting far right tendencies, if they are also edgy sub-cultural actors?

Coleman's book makes it clear that Anonymous is a subculture in the sense that Dick Hebdidge would recognize as "disruptive noise that makes us see the world anew."⁵ Coleman portrays the semiotic

landscape of Anonymous as a “quintessential example of what folklorists define as argot- (a specialized and esoteric terminology used by a subcultural group). Since argot is so opaque and particular it serves to, enact secrecy or, at minimum, erect some very stiff social boundaries [...] the Lulz are unmistakably imbued with danger and mystery, and thus speak foremost to the pleasures of transgression...”⁶

In a later journal article from 2012 Coleman ⁷⁸ posited the driving force behind her research as, “the need to discover how and why what had once been an anarchic ‘hate machine’ [which was the caricature of Anonymous in its early stages] had been transformed into one of the most adroit and effective political operations of recent times”⁷⁸. Now, six years later, *we* are being forced to reflect on how 4chan was transformed ~~into from an environment dominated by broadly progressive campaigning movements into~~ a realm ~~increasingly readily~~ associated with ~~neo-Nazis~~? Nagle and Cramer’s work help us to address this question, against a background in which 4chan’s founder, Christopher Poole has never abandoned his stance on “political incorrectness”.

Both Cramer’s lecture, *Mapping the Alt-right* ⁸⁹ and Nagle’s book, *Kill all Normies*, ⁹⁴⁰ succeed in identifying different moments of symbiosis, in a sequence of steps leading to the point of irreversible change when established neo-Nazi enclaves such as Stormfront, began actively recruiting on 4chan, opportunistically capitalizing on youthful grass-roots malcontent so helping to propel white supremacist narratives back into the mainstream of political discourse. This narrative of co-option was later amplified into a more questionable belief that the Alt-right had played a significant role in the Trump victory. The opportunity to evaluate the evidence for these claims gave a special urgency to Cramer’s lecture, delivered in Rotterdam in November 2016 shortly after the US election. Nagle’s book was published later in 2017 and so had more time to draw together the threads of her years of research to weave together a more complex set of arguments and assertions.

Research in Real-time

Cramer’s lecture reflects his background as a media theorist and was the direct result of his research on memes, undertaken for his course on ‘visual cultures’ in the Willem de Kooning Academy in

Formatted: Font: 8 pt

Comment [DG1]: Yes agreed but maybe this point may best be put as a footnote rather than worked into the text?
I don’t think I conflate 4chan with either Anon or Alt-right as I describe it as an environment or realm.. but maybe this point needs to be stated more explicitly? To remove any possible ambiguity..?

Comment [KG2]: Reply to David Garcia (05/14/2018, 16:26): "..."
Just not sure if it is really correct to say that 4chan was dominated by progressive campaigning movements. I saw the trolling, lulz part as dominating. But the campaigning that WAS there at some point, leaned towards progressive, that is probably true – at least that which had an impact.

Rotterdam. His investigations coincided with the [increased](#) intensity and volume of memes circulating at the height of the Trump campaign. It was immediately clear that however malign this movement was, it was also one of the most vibrant and well-networked subcultures of our time and the left had made a serious error in underestimating its potency. As Trump's campaign team began to increasingly adopt Alt-right memes and tropes, Cramer realised the importance and topicality of the world he was uncovering and decided to deliver a public lecture and to do so at speed. It was an instance when research that acts swiftly pays real dividends as his lecture included shocking examples of Alt-right content captured and disseminated weeks or sometimes days after being posted. This was 'real-time' research in action and although the lecture is over two hours in length it retains a unique sense of urgency.

Transgressive Memes

What separates Cramer's work from many other researchers working in this area is his emphasis on the way expressive media sub-cultures can be formative in influencing outcomes in key battles for the social mind. Though not easy to define, sub-cultures are often recognizable as such, through the act of creating an in-group, often by the use of coded or esoteric language. Cramer's lecture tracks this process as he undertakes a detailed piece of semiotic analysis of the complex but relatively stable compound of realities that constitute Alt-right, through its language and memes. He anatomizes the use of esotericism and explores the ways in which it mixes the humorous and the sinister. He details the evolution of the Pepe the Frog meme as it migrates from harmless 'feel-good' emoji to its connection to the 'Emperor Trump' meme (as Lord of mis-rule) and on to Kek - the Egyptian God of chaos, infusing the embryonic alt-right with an occultist sheen of glamour. Building these layers of coded knowledge creates a cultish sense of an inner world for the elect whilst at the same time projecting a subtly different image of themselves to the wider public, all of which contributed to their partially successful efforts in making fascism cool, fashionable or 'Fashy' as Alt.right liked to call it.

Anti-feminist Origins

Nagle's book, though prompt, still came later and was the result of research developed over the last eight years into on-line anti-feminist networks. From its origins in the so-called 'manosphere' Nagle

captures the constellation of activities [as they coalesce into](#) a diverse mix of actors including “teenage gamers, pseudonymous swastika-posting anime lovers, ironic South Park conservatives, anti-feminist pranksters, nerdish harassers and meme-making trolls whose dark humor and love of transgression for its own sake”.¹⁰⁴

Nagle continually brings us back to her central point; that to treat the Alt-right simply as a *political* movement is to miss the fact that an important reason for its appeal is that it is a highly *aesthetic* movement with its own internal language exhibiting the classic traits of a sub-culture. A greater awareness of this dimension by the Clinton team might have helped her avoid the “basket of deplorables” debacle. It was after all Andrew Breitbart, founder of the far right news service Breitbart, who declared that “politics is downstream from culture”.

Nagle emphasises her intellectual debt to an earlier generation of feminist thinkers who writing more than twenty years earlier were already alive to the dangers in some of the biases and assumptions of the Birmingham School, Cultural Studies movement. She credits the work of Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton’s work as historically important in convening the discussion on the tendency in the Cultural Studies movement to mistake certain kinds of sub-cultural aesthetic traits for something progressive politically. In the conversation at Transmediale she takes the time to quote the following passage from Sarah Thornton’s book ‘The Social logic of Sub-cultural capital (1995) that she asserts encapsulates the core argument of her book:

“Vague opposition is certainly how many members of youth sub-cultures characterise their own activities. However we can’t take youth discourses literally. They are not a transparent window on the world. Many cultural studies have made the mistake of doing this. They have been insufficiently critical of sub-cultural ideologies. First because they were diverted by the task of puncturing and contesting dominant ideology and second because their biases have tended to agree with anti-mass society discourses of the youth discourses they study”
...“While youth have celebrated underground the academics have venerated sub-cultures. Where young people have denounced the commercial, scholars have criticised hegemony. Where one has lamented selling out the other has theorised incorporation. In this way the

Birmingham tradition has both over politicised youthful leisure and at the same time ignored the subtle relations of power at play within it” Sarah Thornton - The Social logic of Sub-cultural capital (1995)

“Vague opposition is certainly how many members of youth sub-cultures characterise their own activity. However we can’t take youth discourses literally. They are not a transparent window on the world many cultural studies have made the mistake of doing this. They have been insufficiently critical of sub-cultural ideologies. Firstly because they were diverted by the task of puncturing and contesting dominant ideology and second because their biases have tended to agree with anti-mass society discourses of the youth discourses they study” ...”While youth have celebrated underground the academics have venerated sub-cultures. While young people have denounced the commercial, scholars have criticised hegemony. While one has lamented selling-out the other has theorised incorporation. In this way the Birmingham tradition has both over politicised youthful leisure and at the same time ignored the subtle relations at play within it” Sarah Thornton—The Social logic of Sub-cultural capital (1995)

This, Nagle contends, is essentially the argument of her book, that there are quite reactionary, misanthropic and nasty elements that were there for a very long time in this on-line world and it came to full fruition in the form of the Alt.right.

The Double Edge Sword of Transgression

One of the most effective weapons in the meme wars was the tactical use of irony to undercut serious criticism. Although profoundly different in all other respects Lulz culture shares this use of irony as double edge sword with the much earlier sub-culture of CAMP. I mention this because Susan Sontag’s [masterpiece masterful essay](#) *Notes on Camp* is extremely useful in illuminating how a sensibility that is alive to the double sense in which things can be taken so that “everything is in quotation marks” can be operationalized as “...a solvent for morality. It neutralizes moral indignation”. ¹¹⁴² It was a tactic effectively deployed by the Alt-light troll, Milo Yiannopoulos before his spectacular fall from grace.

Comment [KG3]: Check quote.

Towards the end of the discussion in Berlin, Nagle raised one of the central questions of her book, the role of transgression in progressive politics, when she asks “whether we are to conclude that subculture *itself* is just a neutral thing and that it can take on any political form?”. In ‘Kill all Normies’ her

position is clear enough. She argues that sub-cultures (at least in their more transgressive mode) are far from neutral. In fact she suggests that it constitutes a nihilistic thread running through the heart of the modernist avant-garde stretching from de Sade to the surrealists and the Situationists (whom she at least concedes “have a better world in their hearts”) en route to the 1960s counter-culture and culminating in the Manson Murders are the “logical culmination of throwing off the shackles of conscience and consciousness, the grim flowering of the id’s voodoo energies”.

Cramer also contends that this is a very old subject. He points to both recent and historical expressions from Laibach to Peter Soto’s magazine *Pure*, whilst reminding us that this is a recurring naiveté in which successive generations repeat the same mistake of seeing transgressive sub-cultures as embracing just one political orientation. The implication is that we should have outgrown this assumption as Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectics of Enlightenment* was at least in part an investigation into how progressive discourse can turn into barbarism.

Although both speakers are equally aware of the issue of transgression being uncritically celebrated by the academic and artistic left I would argue that Cramer’s attitude to sub-cultural transgression is more ambivalent than Nagle’s. In a number of lectures and interviews he gives a positive ‘spin’ to the fact that the ‘message boards’ founded on principles of anonymity are probably the “last unregulated spaces on the internet”. In these and other pronouncements there is suggestion of loyalty to principles that hark back to the early days of the internet, where the *right* to anonymity was a key formative feature of early digital cultures.

In an interview with Eric Davis’s on the *Expanding Mind* podcast⁹ Cramer even playfully suggests the possibility of what he calls an “ecology of nihilism” positing that impulses essential for creativity in art might usefully be siloed into a kind of separate arts category, whilst simultaneously suggesting that areas like politics or banking could be kept deliberately *boring*, as the damage that occurs when these areas become ‘creative’ are there for all to see. I recognise that it’s unfair to quote from a relatively informal exploratory interview in which Cramer was simply indulging in a kind of ‘what if’ thought experiment. But let’s be clear, the Gramscians of both the right and the left continue to demonstrate the importance of the arts in the affective dimension of politics and that siloes imagined here are neither possible nor desirable.

The controversial element of Nagle's book, that the discussion in *Transmediale* left relatively untouched, are the assertions for which she has received some of the most sustained criticism from some areas on the left. Unsurprisingly this springs from her proposition that one contributory factor in the emergence of "a new right sensibility among a younger generation" was as a reaction to an over zealous brand of identity politics (with a particular emphasis on gender fluidity) that was ultra-sensitive in its policing of even trivial or inadvertent infringements of linguistic norms and exhibiting a punitive ethos typified by 'call out culture'. Nagle argues that some of the more extreme examples of what she calls 'Tumblr liberalism' inadvertently fuelled the free speech fundamentalists on 4chan, seeking to resist "preachy, performatively 'woke' Tumblr style identity politics.

Learning the Right Lessons

The shock and surprise at the success of the Alt-right insurgency not only overturned entrenched assumptions about the intrinsically progressive nature of the transgressive impulse, it also, as I argued in the opening paragraphs of this essay, undermines a growing consensus on the left that DIY grass roots activism media activism is fundamentally futile. Typical proponents of this view are Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams's who in their influential critiques of what they call 'folk politics' target the practices that aim to "bring politics down to the 'human scale' by emphasising the temporal, spatial and conceptual immediacy".¹³⁴⁴ To Srnicek and Williams the tactics of withdrawal, resistance, localism and above all autonomous spaces "represent a defensive game against an uncompromising and incessantly encroaching capitalism.. "As our political, economic, social and technological world changes, tactics and strategies that were precious and capable of transforming collective power into transformational gains have now been drained of effectiveness." [...] "Capitalism" they argue "is an aggressively expansive universal, from which efforts to segregate a space of autonomy are bound to fail." ¹⁴⁴⁵ It should now be clear that the impact of the new autonomous zones of 4chan and 8chan demonstrate that the desire for unregulated spaces remains unabated. Though some of the consequences of anonymity are highly problematic these domains remain a vital expressive affordance in a world in which the near universality that is 'platform capitalism' appears to obviate any genuine sense of agency.

Comment [DG4]: References given under 13 *Inventing the Future Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*

Comment [KG5]: reference

Nagle's response to these problems ~~is goes on~~ to advocate a kind of aesthetic conservatism, which increases in intensity throughout her book culminating in her conclusion that the real lesson of the alt-right's success in snatching the mantle of radicalism from the left is that counterculture ideals themselves have outlived their usefulness. And that it is now time to stop "flogging the dead horse of 'edginess', ...to... lay the entire paradigm to rest and create something new."

Although Nagle makes important points, we should heed her warnings without following her advice too slavishly. Whilst we might recognise the need for taboos I would argue that we should not follow Nagle all the way down a road that leads to Freud's oppressive social conservatism. Nagle's examples (inevitable given the shortness of her book) are too selective and limited for us to conclude that they demonstrate the inevitable destination of subcultural transgression are the horrors of the Manson murders or the malignancy of the Alt-right.

In the conversation with Cramer, Nagle declared that identifying the Alt-right as a *sub-culture* was somewhat surprising to her as a consensus had arisen among cultural studies critics and scholars that sub-cultures were a thing of the past. This was I assume a throw-away line, as it is far from being the case, as *black* working class sub-cultures based around hip-hop, grime and, most recently, 'drill' have been thriving for decades, embedded into the life of the streets, a powerful mix of music, spoken-word, video and dress codes, with an increasing awareness of its potency as a political force in campaigns from Black Lives Matter to Grime4Corbyn.

As far back as December 9th 2010, ~~when~~ Journalist (and later activist) Paul Mason, ~~when then~~ still Economics Editor for the BBC, covered a story in which 40,000 students converged on London's Parliament Square under the headline "*The Dubstep Rebellion*." Shortly after his blog ¹⁵ was posted some protesters made 'vigorous representations to him via Twitter.. that it was not Dubstep but Grime. "*It was the Grime Revolution, duh* '". Mason goes on to describe the "genre as so dangerous it was effectively banned in the clubs teenagers frequent". Eight years later grime artists are mainstream international celebrities, winning Mercury music awards and today it is *Drill*, with its taunting lyrics and association with violent street gang that has become the default 'scary' genre.

Formatted: Superscript

Formatted: Font: 8 pt

So if we follow Nagle's assumptions of the inevitably nihilistic destination of transgressive sub-cultures too closely and abandon this kind of risky terrain as 'problematic' then the vacuum ~~on the left~~ will ~~be~~ soon be filled.

Another possible instance of the operation of this principal is the likelihood that the dominance of the Alt-right on the message boards might have been more effectively challenged if the US state had not moved so decisively to suppress Anonymous. It was not just the US but also the actions of a number of states worldwide that created paralysis and paranoia not only by infiltrating Anonymous networks but also by delivering a series of cruelly disproportionate prison sentences. Nagle herself points out that this suppression "created a vacuum on the image boards that the rightest side of culture was able to fill with their expert style of anti-PC shock humour and memes". The unintended consequence of this campaign was to effectively neutralise the one entity with the technical skill, the kudos and the cultural capital to have mounted a credible challenge to the Alt-right.

It should now be clear that the world of sub-cultures and their associated 'folk politics' are as dynamic and urgent as ever but the setting they inhabit is very different from the ideals of the internet radicals of the 1990s. Today's on-line sub-cultures are operating at a juncture when digital cultures have become the environment, or what sociologist Marcel Mauss called a 'total social fact'. This new reality constitutes a direct challenge to the concept of the spaces of participation as autonomous, as "today's technologies of participation materialise the very opposite circumstance; here participation becomes deeply entangled with the conduct of every day life." As social theorist, Noortje Marraes argues, "the outstanding feature of digital participation is its *insertibility* (my italics) into other practices and settings." ¹⁶⁴⁷ It is against this back-drop that the continuing quest for unregulated autonomous and quasi-autonomous spaces are playing out, giving rise not so much to the ideal of the autonomous zone envisaged in the 90s but rather to a 'zone of indeterminacy' spawning unpredictable social movements that have demonstrated the continued potency of subversive counter cultures and their disruptive politics. ~~But there is an additional dimension to consider; this new backdrop of the insertibility of digital interventions into all aspects of daily life. This might help might help~~ to account for the enhanced capacity that these forms of activism have demonstrated to progressively undermine traditional media's capacity to 'manufacture consent' by releasing a proliferation of ever more extreme expressions of *dissent*.

Comment [KG6]: This is a provocative and exciting idea to conclude the essay with but it feels too short. The ending becomes a bit flat and does not follow up fully on the Folk Politics debate as promised by the title and introduction -maybe we need more examples / discussion than Anonymous here or expansion on the centrality of the Anon model of folk politics of the left in the future.

Comment [KG7]: I suppose this is Maartjes too?

Comment [KG8]: Check spelling of name.

The title of theorist Michael Seemann's book 'Digital Tailspin' ¹⁷⁴⁸ is a useful short-hand term to describe our predicament and a reminder of the high stakes of any intervention. The political success of the Alt-right reminds us that the territories occupied by transgressive sub-cultures must continue to be contested, as we have learned to our cost that any vacuum will be swiftly filled by the raw and malign simplicities of a resurgent far right. But above all the success of the [Alt-right](#) should have taught us that the true revenge of folk politics depends on the realisation that protest movements that occupy the streets, the squares, the message boards and the campuses alone are not enough. They must be accompanied by serious engagement with technical and political infrastructures that enable access to the seats of institutional power, up to and including government.

[\(The message boards do not so much create the](#)

David Garcia. May 2018

1. Dean. J *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Cornell University Press (2002))^l
2. Angela Nagle & Florian Cramer. Discussion: Better Think Twice Subcultures Alts and the Politics of Transgression Face Value - Transmediale 2018 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85owbTTYqmo>
3. Coleman. G - Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistle Blower, Spy. *The Many Faces of Anonymous* (2005) Verso
4. ~~Marg~~res.N *Digital Sociology-* Verso (2018) 146
5. Hebridge. D *Subculture: The Meaning of Style-* Routledge (1979) 31
67. Coleman. G - Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistle Blower, Spy. *The Many Faces of Anonymous* Verso (2005) 31
78. Gabriella Coleman "our Weirdness is Free." May 9 (2012) 83-95
- 89a. Florian Cramer Mapping the Alt-right, lecture, Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam (2016) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w94mQjxHkRs>
- 89b. Florian Cramer FACT, How Much of this is Fiction, Liverpool (2016) –shorter version with better sound quality. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiNYuhLKzi8>
940. Nagle. A *Kill All Normies*, Zero Books (2017) ²
1044. Ibid. 35
1142. Sontag. S. Notes on Camp. *Partisan Review* (1964) <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html>
1243. Alt-Right Meme Magic
Eric Davis's Expanding Mind Podcast archived at <https://techgnosis.com/alt-right-meme-magic/>
1344. Inventing the Future *Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*
by [Nick Srnicek](#) and [Alex Williams](#)
1445. Ibid.

1546. http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/paulmason/2010/12/9122010_dubstep_rebellion_-br.html
1647. Mares. N. Digital Sociology- Verso (2018) 146
1748. Seemann. M Digital Tailspin -Institute of Network Cultures- (2015)